

A story about the Old “Union Club” Days written in 1951.



Times have changed considerably since the picture below was taken at a spot just east of Momence along the Kankakee River. Back in 1879 and 1880 when the “Union Club” made regular runs between Momence and the state line, the men pictured below were regular patrons of the excursion boat. Leaning out of the cabin are Mr. Grimes and Andy Marshall, engineer. The man resting his arm on the cabin is unidentified, but the three next to him are Ed Snow, foreman at the Brick Yard, George Simmons and Ruben Edwards. Standing on top of the cabin at the left is John Dubois and the young boy sitting on the roof is Eddie Cook, son of Edward Cook. Aaron Perkins is the tall man behind Cook. All the other are unidentified.

If on some bright Sunday afternoon this fall you happen to hear the swish of an old river steamboat and the ringing of its bell, just remember that it is almost time for Indian Summer-when a fellow can expect to hear and see most anything.

Chances are that such sound would be drifting your way from the old hull of the “Dew Drop” or the “Damfino” And who would be able to tell exactly-such sounds might even be from the “Union Club” or the “Morning Glory.”

Of course, if the banks of the Kankakee River could tell their story, you would be sure of just which of the old steamers was winding its way past your vantage point. For back in the late 1870s and during the 1880s, river steamboats were common around the Momence area.

And one of the earliest large steamboats to run near Momence was the “Union Club” pictured above with a few of its many passengers. The sturdy craft was built either in 1878 or 1879 according to Mrs. Elmer C. Gratteau whose father, Andy Marshall, was chief engineer of the boat.

A favorite for family excursions, the “Union Club” was in almost constant use during the summer months when trips were made to Olds’ Landing, Indian Town and as far east as the state line.

According to an account written in the Momence Reporter in 1879, Walter Chipman was one of the proprietors of the steamer, which could carry about 25 to 30 people as passengers. M.O. Clark editor and publisher of the paper had this to say about his trip on the steamer.

“The steamer started up the river at 10 a.m. and after stopping at Olds’ landing, Dan Parmley’s, Indian Town and the state line we started for home and arrived at the wharf in Momence at 5:45 p.m. Sunday. It was the tiptoppest day ever for an excursion. The little steamer works exceedingly steady and the engine is a beauty. It is compact, efficient and works to a charm. It could almost be put in a flour barrel, and yet it has the power necessary to propel the boat satisfactorily. The steamer made good time up the river and down the river it scooted.”

From various other accounts printed in the Momence Reporter of that year, it would seem that several Momence men had an interest in the steamer and that there were several who took over as engineer on its various excursions. H.D. Worcester, Ed Cooke and a Mr. Lewis of Chicago, inventor of the steamer’s engine, were among those who served as engineers.

Record time for the “Union Club” on a trip up stream was seven miles an hour, but she made even better time on her way back.

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